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• A GARLAND FOR MAY DAY 1895 •
 • DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS BY WALTER CRANE •

Birth of a Holiday: The First of May - Eric

Hobsbawm

Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm's account of the international celebration of Mayday.

In 1990 Michael Ignatieff, writing about Easter in the *Observer*, observed that 'secular societies have never succeeded in providing alternatives to religious rituals'. And he pointed out that the French Revolution 'may have turned subjects into citizens, may have put *liberte*, *egalite* and *fraternite* on the lintel of every

school and put the monasteries to the sack, but apart from the Fourteenth of July it never made a dent on the old Christian calendar'. My present subject is perhaps the only unquestionable dent made by a secular movement in the Christian or any other official calendar, a holiday established not in one or two countries, but in 1990 officially in 107 states. What is more, it is an occasion established not by the power of governments or conquerors, but by an entirely unofficial movement of poor men and women. I am speaking of May Day, or more precisely of the First of May, the international

festival of the working-class movement, whose centenary ought to have been celebrated in 1990, for it was inaugurated in 1890.

'Ought to be' is the correct phrase, for, apart from the historians, few have shown much interest in this occasion, not even in those socialist parties which are the lineal descendants of those which, at the inaugural congresses of what became the Second International, in 1889

called for a simultaneous international workers' demonstration in favour of a law to limit the working day to eight hours to be held on 1 May 1890. This is true even of those parties actually represented at the 1889 congresses, and which are still in existence. These parties of the Second International or their descendants today provide the governments or the main oppositions or alternative governments almost everywhere in Europe west of what until recently was the self-described region of 'really existing socialism'. One might have expected them to show greater pride, or even merely greater interest in their past.

The strongest political reaction in Britain to the centenary of May Day came from Sir John Hackett, a former general and, I am sorry to say, former head of a college of the University of London, who called for the abolition of May Day, which he appeared to regard as some sort of Soviet invention. It ought not, he felt, to survive the fall of international communism.

However, the origin of the European Community's spring May Day holiday is the opposite of Bolshevik or even social democratic. It goes back to the anti-socialist politicians who, recognizing how deeply the roots of May Day reached into the soil of the western working classes, wanted to counter the appeal of labour and socialist movements by co-opting their festival and turning it into something else. To cite a French parliamentary proposal of April 1920, supported by forty-one deputies united by nothing except *not* being socialists:

Quote:

This holiday should not contain any element of jealousy and hatred [the code word for class struggle]. All classes, if classes can still be said to exist, and all productive energies of the nation should fraternize, inspired by the same idea and the same ideal.

Those who, before the European Community, went furthest in co-opting May Day were on the extreme right, not the left. Hitler's government was the first after the USSR to make the First of May into an official National Day of Labour. Marshal Petain's Vichy government declared the First of May a Festival of Labour and Concord and is said to have been inspired to do so by the Phalangist May Day of Franco's Spain, where the Marshal had been an admiring ambassador. Indeed, the European Economic Community which made May Day into a public holiday was a body composed not, in spite of Mrs Thatcher's views on the subject, of socialist but of predominantly anti-socialist governments. Western official May Days were recognitions of the need to come to terms with the tradition of the unofficial May Days and to detach it from labour movements, class consciousness and class struggle. But how did it come about that this tradition was so strong that even its enemies thought they had to take it over, even when, like Hitler, Franco and Petain, they destroyed the socialist labour movement?

The extraordinary thing about the evolution of this institution is that it was unintended and unplanned. To this extent it was not so much an 'invented tradition' as a suddenly erupting one. The immediate origin of May Day is not in dispute. It was a resolution passed by one of the two rival founding congresses of the International - the Marxist one - in Paris in July 1889, centenary year of the French Revolution. This called for an international demonstration by workers on the same day, when they would put the demand for a Legal Eight Hour Day to their respective public and other authorities. And since the American Federation of Labor had already decided to hold such a demonstration on 1 May 1890, this day was to be chosen for the international demonstration. Ironically, in the USA itself May Day was never to establish

itself as it did elsewhere, if only because an increasingly official public holiday of labour, Labor Day, the first Monday in September, was already in existence.

Scholars have naturally investigated the origins of this resolution, and how it

related to the earlier history of the struggle for the Legal Eight-Hour Day in the USA and elsewhere, but these matters do not concern us here. What is relevant to the present argument is how what the resolution envisaged differed from what actually came about. Let us note three facts about the original proposal. First, the call was simply for a single, one-off, international manifestation. There is no suggestion that it should be repeated, let alone become a regular annual event. Second, there was no suggestion that it should be a particularly festive or ritual occasion, although the labour movements of all countries were authorized to 'realize this demonstration in such ways as are made necessary by the situation in their country'. This, of course, was an emergency exit left for the sake of the German Social Democratic Party, which was still at this time illegal under Bismarck's anti-socialist law. Third, there is no sign that this resolution was seen as particularly important at the time. On the contrary, the contemporary press reports barely mention it, if at all, and, with one exception (curiously enough a bourgeois paper), without the proposed date. Even the official Congress Report, published by the German Social Democratic Party, merely mentions the proposers of the resolution and prints its text without any comment or apparent sense that this was a matter of Significance. In short, as Edouard Vaillant, one of the more eminent and politically sensitive delegates to the Congress, recalled a few years later: 'Who could have predicted ... the rapid rise of May Day?'

Its rapid rise and institutionalization were certainly due to the extraordinary success of the first May Day demonstrations in 1890, at least in Europe west of the Russian Empire and the Balkans. The socialists had chosen the right moment to found or, if we prefer, reconstitute an International. The first May Day coincided with a triumphant advance of labour strength and confidence in numerous countries. To cite merely two familiar examples: the outburst of the New Unionism in Britain which followed the Dock Strike of 1889, and the socialist victory in Germany, where the Reichstag refused to continue Bismarck's anti-socialist law in January 1890, with the result that a month later the Social Democratic Party doubled its vote at the general election and emerged with just under 20 per cent of the total vote. To make a success of mass demonstrations at such a moment was not difficult, for both activists and militants put their hearts into them, while masses of ordinary workers joined them to celebrate a sense of victory, power, recognition and hope.

And yet the *extent* to which the workers took part in these meetings amazed those who had called upon them to do so, notably the 300,000 who filled Hyde Park in London, which thus, for the first and last time, provided the largest

demonstration of the day. For, while all socialist parties and organizations had naturally organized meets, only some had recognized the full potential of the occasion and put their all into it from the start. The Austrian Social Democratic Party was exceptional in its immediate sense of the mass mood, with the result that, as Frederick Engels observed a few weeks later, 'on the continent it was Austria, and in Austria Vienna, which celebrated this festival in the most splendid and appropriate manner'.

Indeed, in several countries, so far from throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the preparation of May Day, local parties and movements were, as usual in the politics of the left, handicapped by ideological arguments and divisions about the legitimate form or forms of such demonstrations - we shall return to them below - or by sheer caution. In the face of a highly nervous, even on occasion hysterical, reaction to the prospect of the day by governments, middle-class opinion and employers who threatened police repression and victimization, responsible socialist leaders often preferred to avoid excessively provocative forms of confrontation. This was notably the case in Germany, where the ban on the party

had only just been revoked after eleven years of illegality. 'We have every reason to keep the masses under control at the First of May demonstration,' wrote the party leader August Bebel to Engels. 'We must avoid conflicts.' And Engels agreed.

The crucial matter at issue was whether the workers should be asked to demonstrate in working time, that is to go on strike, for in 1890 the First of May fell on a Thursday.

Basically, cautious parties and strong established trade unions - unless they deliberately wanted to be or found themselves engaged in industrial action, as was the plan of the American Federation of Labor - did not see why they should stick their own and their members' necks out for the sake of a symbolic gesture. They therefore tended to opt for a demonstration on the first *Sunday* in May and not on the first day of the month. This was and remained the British option, which was why the first great May Day took place on 4 May.

However, it was also the preference of the German party, although there, unlike Britain, in practice it was the First of May that prevailed. In fact, the question was to be formally discussed at the Brussels International Socialist Congress of

1891, with the British and Germans opposing the French and Austrians on this point, and being outvoted. Once again this issue, like so many other aspects of May Day, was the accidental by-product of the international choice of the date. The original resolution made no reference at all to stopping work. The problem arose simply because the first May Day fell on a weekday, as everybody planning the demonstration immediately and necessarily discovered.

Caution dictated otherwise. But what actually made May Day was precisely the choice of symbol over practical reason. It was the act of symbolically stopping work which turned May Day into more than just another demonstration, or even another commemorative occasion. It was in the countries or cities where parties, even against hesitant unions, insisted on the symbolic strike that May Day really became a central part of working-class life and of labour identity, as it never really did in Britain, in spite of its brilliant start. For refraining from work on a working day was both an assertion of working-class power - in fact, the quintessential assertion of this power - and the essence of freedom, namely not being forced to labour in the sweat of one's brow, but choosing what to do in the company of family and friends. It was thus both a gesture of class assertion and class struggle and a holiday: a sort of trailer for the good life to come after the emancipation of labour. And, of course, in the circumstances of 1890 it was also a celebration of victory, a winner's lap of honour round the stadium. Seen in this light May Day carried with it a rich cargo of emotion and hope.

This is what Victor Adler realized when, against advice from the German Social Democratic Party, he insisted that the Austrian party must provoke precisely the confrontation which Bebel wanted to avoid. Like Bebel he recognized the mood of euphoria, of mass conversion, almost of messianic expectation which swept through so many working classes at this time.

'The elections have turned the

heads of the less politically educated [*geschult*] masses. They believe they have only to want something and everything can be achieved,' as Bebel put it. Unlike Bebel, Adler still needed to mobilize these sentiments to build a mass party out of a combination of activists and rising mass sympathy. Moreover, unlike the Germans, Austrian workers did not yet have the vote.

The movement's strength could not therefore be demonstrated electorally as yet. Again, the Scandinavians understood the mobilizing potential of direct action

when, after the first May Day, they voted in favour of a repetition of the demonstration in 1891, 'especially if combined with a cessation of work, and not merely simple expressions of opinion'. The International itself took the same view when in 1891 it voted (against the British and German delegates as we have seen) to hold the demonstration on the First of May and 'to cease work wherever it is not impossible to do so.

This did not mean that the international movement called for a general strike as such, for, with all the boundless expectations of the moment, organized workers were in practice aware both of their strength and of their weakness. Whether people should strike on May Day, or could be expected to give up a day's pay for the demonstration, were questions widely discussed in the pubs and bars of proletarian Hamburg, according to the plain-clothes policemen sent by the Senate to listen to workers' conversations in that massively 'red' city. It was understood that many workers would be unable to come out, even if they wanted to.

Thus the railwaymen sent a cable to the first Copenhagen May Day which was read out and cheered: 'Since we cannot be present at the meeting because of the pressure exerted by those in power, we will not omit fully supporting the demand for the eight-hour working day.

However, where employers knew that workers were strong and solidly committed, they would often tacitly accept that the day could be taken off. This was often the case in Austria.

Thus, in spite of the clear instruction from the Ministry of the Interior that processions were banned and taking time off was not to be permitted; and in spite of the formal decision by employers *not* to consider the First of May a holiday - and sometimes even to substitute the day *before* the First of May as a works holiday - the State Armaments Factory in Steyr, Upper Austria, shut down on the First of May 1890 and every year thereafter. In any case, enough workers came out in enough countries to make the stop-work movement plausible. After all, in Copenhagen about 40 per cent of the city's workers were actually present at the demonstration in 1890.

Given this remarkable and often unexpected success of the first May Day it was natural that a repeat performance should be demanded. As we have already seen, the united Scandinavian movements asked for it in the summer of 1890, as did

the Spaniards. By the end of the year the bulk of the European parties had followed suit. That the occasion should become a regular annual event may not have been suggested first by the militants of Toulouse who passed a resolution to this effect in 1890, but to no one's surprise the Brussels congress of the International in 1891 committed the movement to a regular annual May Day. However, it also did two other things, while insisting, as we have seen, that May Day must be celebrated by a single demonstration on the first day of the month, whatever that day might be, in order to emphasize 'its true character as an economic demand for the eight-hour day and an assertion of class struggle'. It added at least two other demands to the eight-hour day: labour legislation and the fight against war. Although it was henceforth an official part of May Day, in itself the peace slogan was not really integrated into the popular May Day tradition, except as something that reinforced the international character of the occasion. However, in addition to expanding the programmatic content of the demonstration, the resolution included another innovation. It spoke of 'celebrating' May Day. The movement had come officially to recognize it not only as a political activity but as a festival.

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'celebrating' May Day. The movement had come officially to recognize it not only as a political activity but as a festival.

Once again, this was not part of the original plan. On the contrary, the militant wing of the movement and, it need hardly be added, the anarchists opposed the idea of festivities passionately on ideological grounds. May Day was a day of struggle. The anarchists would have preferred it to broaden out from a single day's leisure extorted from the capitalists into the great general strike which would overthrow the entire system. As so often, the most militant revolutionaries took a sombre view of the class struggle, as the iconography of black and grey masses lightened by no more than the occasional red flag so often confirms. The anarchists preferred to see May Day as a commemoration of martyrs - the Chicago martyrs of 1886, 'a day of grief rather than a day of celebration', and where they were influential, as in Spain, South America and Italy, the martyrological aspect of May Day actually became part of the occasion. Cakes and ale were not part of the revolutionary game-plan. In fact, as a recent study of the anarchist May Day in Barcelona brings out, refusing to treat it or even to call it a 'Festa del Treball', a labour festival, was one of its chief characteristics before the Republic. To hell with symbolic actions: either the world revolution or nothing. Some anarchists even refused to encourage the May Day strike, on the ground that anything that did not actually initiate the revolution could be no more than yet another reformist diversion. The revolutionary syndicalist French Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) did not resign itself to May Day festivity until after the First World War.

The leaders of the Second International may well have encouraged the transformation of May Day into a festival, since they certainly wanted to avoid anarchist confrontational tactics and naturally also favoured the broadest possible basis for the demonstrations. But the idea of a class holiday, both struggle and a good time, was definitely not in their minds originally.

Where did it come from?

Initially the choice of date almost certainly played a crucial role. Spring holidays are profoundly rooted in the ritual cycle of the year in the temperate northern hemisphere, and indeed the month of May itself symbolizes the renewal of nature. In Sweden, for instance, the First of May was already by long tradition almost a public holiday. This, incidentally, was one of the problems about celebrating wintry May Days in otherwise militant Australia. From the abundant

icon-ographical and literary material at our disposal, which has been made available in recent years, it is quite evident that nature, plants and above all flowers were automatically and universally held to symbolize the occasion. The simplest of rural gatherings, like the 1890 meeting in a Styrian village, shows not banners but garlanded boards with slogans, as well as musicians. A charming photograph of a later provincial May Day, also in Austria, shows the social democratic worker-cyclists, male and female, parading with wheels and handlebars wreathed in flowers, and a small flower-decked May child in a sort of baby-seat slung between two bicycles.

Flowers appear unselfconsciously round the stern portraits of the seven Austrian delegates to the 1889 International Congress, distributed for the first Vienna May Day. Flowers even infiltrate the militant myths. In France the *fusillade de Fourmies* of 1891, with its ten dead, is symbolized in the new tradition by Maria Blondeau, eighteen years old, who danced at the head of 200 young people of both sexes, swinging a branch of flowering hawthorn which her fiance had given her, until the troops shot her dead. Two May traditions patently merge in this image. What flowers? Initially, as the hawthorn branch suggests, colours suggestive of spring rather than politics, even though the movement soon comes to settle on blossoms of its own colour: roses, poppies and above all red carnations. However, national styles vary.

Nevertheless, flowers and those other symbols of burgeoning growth, youth, renewal and hope, namely young women, are central. It is no accident that the most universal icons for the occasion, reproduced time and again in a variety of languages, come from Walter Crane -

especially the famous young woman in a Phrygian bonnet surrounded by garlands. The British socialist movement was small and unimportant and its May Days, after the first few years, were marginal. However, through William Morris, Crane and the arts-and-crafts movement, inspirers of the most influential 'new art' or art nouveau of the period, it found the exact expression for the spirit of the times. The British iconographic influence is not the least evidence for the internationalism of May Day.

In fact, the idea of a public festival or holiday of labour arose, once again, spontaneously and almost immediately - no doubt helped along by the fact that in German the word *feiern* can mean both 'not working' and 'formally celebrating'. (The use of 'playing' as a synonym for

'striking', common in England in the first part of the century, no longer seems common by its end.) In any case it seemed logical on a day when people stayed away from work to supplement the morning's political meetings and marches with sociability and entertainment later, all the more so as the role of inns and restaurants as meeting-places for the movement was so important. Publicans and *cabaretieri* formed a significant section of socialist activists in more than one country.

One major consequence of this must be immediately mentioned. Unlike politics, which was in those days 'men's business', holidays included women and children. Both the visual and the literary sources demonstrate the presence and participation of women in May Day from the start. What made it a genuine class display, and incidentally, as in Spain, increasingly attracted workers who were not politically with the socialists, was precisely that it was not confined to men but belonged to families. And in turn, through May Day, women who were not themselves directly in the labour market as wage-workers, that is to say the bulk of married working-class women in a number of countries, were publicly identified with movement and class. If a working life of wage-labour belonged chiefly to men, refusing to work for a day united age and sex in the working class.

Practically all regular holidays before this time had been religious holidays, at all events in Europe, except in Britain where, typically, the European Community's May Day has been assimilated to a Bank Holiday. May Day shared with Christian holidays the aspiration to universality, or, in labour terms, internationalism. This universality I deeply impressed participants and added to the day's appeal. The numerous May Day broadsheets, often locally produced, which are so valuable a source for the iconography and cultural history of the occasion - 308 different numbers of such ephemera have been preserved for pre-fascist Italy alone - constantly dwell on this. The first May Day journal from Bologna in 1891 contains no fewer than four items specifically on the universality of the day. And, of course, the analogy with Easter or Whitsun seemed as obvious as that with the spring celebrations of folk custom.

Italian socialists, keenly aware of the spontaneous appeal of the new *festa del lavoro* to a largely Catholic and illiterate population, used the term 'the workers' Easter' from, at the latest, 1892, and such analogies became internationally current in the second half of the 1890s.³² One can readily see why. The similarity of the new socialist movement to a religious movement, even, in the

first heady years of May Day, to a religious revival movement with messianic expectations was patent. So, in some ways, was the similarity of the body of early leaders, activists and propagandists to a priesthood, or at least to a body of lay preachers. We have an extraordinary leaflet from Charleroi, Belgium in 1898, which reproduces what can only be described as a May Day sermon: no other word will do. It was drawn up by, or in the name of, ten deputies and senators of the Parti Ouvrier Belge,

undoubtedly atheists to a man, under the joint epigraphs 'Workers of all lands unite (Karl Marx)' and 'Love One Another (jesus)'. A few samples will suggest its mood: Quote:

This [it began] is the hour of spring and festivity when the perpetual Evolution of nature shines forth in its glory. Like nature, fill yourselves with hope and prepare for The New Life.

After some passages of moral instruction ('Show self-respect: Beware of the liquids that make you drunk and the passions that degrade' and so on) and socialist encouragement, it concluded with

a passage of millennial hope:

Quote:

Soon frontiers will fade away! Soon there will be an end to wars and armies! Every time that you practice the socialist virtues of Solidarity and Love, you will bring this future closer. And then, in peace and joy, a world will come into being in which Socialism will triumph, once the social duty of all is properly understood as bringing about the all-round development of each.

Yet the point about the new labour movement was not that it was a faith, and one which often echoed the tone and style of religious discourse, but that it was so little influenced by the

.religious model even in countries where the masses were deeply religious and steeped in church ways. Moreover, there was little convergence between the old and the new Faith except sometimes (but not always) where Protestantism took the form of unofficial and implicitly oppositionist sects rather than Churches, as in England. Socialist labour was a militantly secular, anti-religious movement which converted pious or formerly pious populations *en masse*.

We can also understand why this was so. Socialism and the labour movement appealed to men and women for whom, as a novel class conscious of itself as such, there was no proper place in the community of which established Churches, and notably the Catholic Church, were the traditional expression. There were indeed settlements of 'outsiders', by occupation as in mining or proto-industrial or factory villages, by origin like the Albanians of what became the quintessentially 'red' village of Piana dei Greci in Sicily (now Piana degli Albanesi), or united by some other criterion that separated them collectively from the wider society. There

'the movement' might function as *the* community, and in doing so take over many of the old village practices hitherto monopolized by religion. However, this was unusual. In fact a major reason for the massive success of May Day was that it was seen as the *only* holiday associated exclusively with the working class as such, not shared with anyone else, and moreover one extorted by the workers' own action. More than this: it was a day on which those who were usually invisible went on public display and, at least for one day, captured the official space of rulers and society. In this respect the galas of British miners, of which the Durham miners' gala is the longest survivor, anticipated May Day, but on the basis of one industry and not the working class as a whole. In this sense the only relation between May Day and traditional religion was the claim to equal rights. 'The priests have their festivals,'

announced the 1891 May Day broadsheet of Voghera in the Po valley, 'the Moderates have their festivals. So have the Democrats. The First of May is the Festival of the workers of the entire world.'

But there was another thing that distanced the movement from religion. Its key word was

'new', as in *Die Neue Zeit* (New Times), title of Kautsky's Marxist theoretical review, and as in the Austrian labour song still associated with May Day, and whose refrain runs: 'Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit' ('The new times are advancing with us'). As both Scandinavian and Austrian experience shows, socialism often came into the countryside and provincial towns

literally with the railways, with those who built and manned them, and with the new ideas and new times they brought. Unlike other public holidays, including most of the ritual occasions of the labour movement up till then, May Day did

not commemorate anything - at all events outside the range of anarchist influence which, as we have seen, liked to link it with the Chicago anarchists of 1886. It was about nothing but the future, which, unlike a past that had nothing to give to the proletariat except bad memories ('Du passe faisons table rase,' sang the Inter-nationale, not by accident), offered emancipation. Unlike traditional religion, 'the movement' offered not rewards after death but the new Jerusalem on this earth.

The iconography of May Day, which developed its own imagery and symbolism very quickly, is entirely future-oriented. What the future would bring was not at all clear, only that it would be good and that it would inevitably come.

Fortunately for the success of May Day, at least one way forward to the future turned the occasion into something more than a demonstration and a festival. In 1890 electoral democracy was still extremely uncommon in Europe, and the demand for universal suffrage was readily added to that for the eight-hour day and the other May Day slogans. Curiously enough, the demand for the vote, although it became an integral part of May Day in Austria, Belgium, Scandinavia, Italy and elsewhere until it was achieved, never formed an *ex officio* international part of its political content like the eight-hour day and, later, peace. Nevertheless, where applicable, it became an integral part of the occasion and greatly added to its significance.

In fact, the practice of organizing or threatening general strikes for universal suffrage, which developed with some success in Belgium, Sweden and Austria, and helped to hold party and unions together, grew out of the symbolic work stoppages of May Day. The first such strike was started by the Belgian miners on 1 May 1891.⁴⁰ On the other hand trade unions were far more concerned with the Swedish May Day slogan 'shorter hours and higher wages' than with any other aspect of the great day. There were times, as in Italy, when they concentrated on this and left even democracy to others. The great advances of the movement, including its effective championship of democracy, were not based on narrow economic self-interest.

Democracy was, of course, central to the socialist labour movements. It was not only essential for its progress but inseparable from it. The first May Day in Germany was commemorated by a plaque which showed Karl Marx on one side and the Statue of Liberty on the other. An Austrian May Day print of 1891 shows Marx, holding *Das Kapital*, pointing across the sea to one of those romantic islands familiar to contemporaries from paintings of a Mediterranean

character, behind which there rises the May Day sun, which was to be the most lasting and potent symbol of the future. Its rays carried the slogans of the French Revolution: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, which are found on so many of the early May Day badges and mementoes. Marx is surrounded by workers, presumably ready to man the fleet of ships due to sail to the island, whatever it might be, their sails inscribed: Universal and Direct Suffrage. Eight-Hour Day and Protection for the Workers. This was the original tradition of May Day.

That tradition arose with extraordinary rapidity - within two or three years - by means of a curious symbiosis between the slogans of the socialist leaders and their often spontaneous interpretation by militants and rank-and-file workers. It took shape in those first few marvellous years of the sudden flowering of mass labour movements and parties. When every day brought visible growth, when the very existence of such movements, the very assertion of *class*, seemed a guarantee of future triumph. More than this: it seemed a sign of imminent triumph as the gates of the new world swung open before the working class.

However, the millennium did not come and May Day, with so much else in the labour movement, had to be regularized and institutionalized, even though something of the old

flowering of hope and triumph returned to it in later years after great struggles and victories.

We can see it in the mad futurist May Days of the early Russian Revolution, and almost everywhere in Europe in 1919-20, when the original May Day demand of the Eight Hours was actually achieved in many countries. We can see it in the May Days of the early Popular Front in France in 1935 and 1936, and in the countries of the continent liberated from occupation, after the defeat of fascism. Still, in most countries of mass socialist labour movements, May Day was routinized some time before 1914.

Curiously, it was during this period of routinization that it acquired its ritualistic side. As an Italian historian has put it, when it ceased to be seen as the immediate antechamber of the great transformation, it became 'a collective rite which requires its own liturgies and divinities', the divinities being usually identifiable as those young women in flowing hair and loose costumes showing the way towards the rising sun to increasingly imprecise crowds or processions of men and women. Was she Liberty, or Spring, or Youth, or Hope, or rosy-

fingering Dawn or a bit of all of these? Who can tell? Iconographically she has no universal characteristic except youth, for even the Phrygian bonnet, which is extremely common, or the traditional attributes of Liberty, are not always found. We can trace this ritualization of the day through the flowers which, as we have seen, are present from the beginning, but become, as it were, officialized towards the end of the century. Thus the red carnation acquired its official status in the Habsburg lands and in Italy from about 1900, when its symbolism was specially explicated in the lively and talented broadsheet from Florence named after it. (Il Garofano Rosso appeared on May Days until the First World War.) The red rose became official in 1911-12. And, to the grief of incorruptible revolutionaries the entirely unpolitical lily-of-the-valley began to infiltrate the workers' May Day in the early 1900s, until it became one of the regular symbols of the day.

Nevertheless, the great era of May Days was not over while they remained both legal - that is, capable of bringing large masses on to the street - and unofficial. Once they became a holiday given or, still worse, imposed from above, their character was necessarily different.

And since public mass mobilization was of their essence, they could not resist illegality, even though the socialists (later communists) of Piana del Albanesi took pride, even in the black days of fascism, in sending some comrades every First of May without fail to the mountain pass where, from what is still known as Dr Barbato's rock, the local apostle of socialism had addressed them in 1893. It was in this same location that the bandit Giuliano massacred the revived revived community demonstration and family picnic after the end of fascism in 1947.

Since 1914, and especially since 1945, May Day has increasingly become either illegal or, more likely, official. Only in those comparatively rare parts of the third world where massive and unofficial socialist labour movements developed in conditions that allowed May Day to flourish is there a real continuity older tradition.

May Day has not, of course, lost its old characteristics everywhere. Nevertheless, even where it is not associated with the fall of old regimes which were once new, as in the USSR

and eastern Europe, it is not too much to claim that for most people even in labour movements the word May Day evokes the past more than the present. The society which gave rise to May Day has changed. How important,

today, are those small proletarian village communities which old Italians remember? 'We marched round the village. Then there was a public meal. All the party members were there and anyone else Who wanted to come.' What has happened in the industrialized world to those who in the 1890s could still recognize themselves in the internationale's 'Arise ye starvelings from your slumbers'? As an old Italian an lady put it in 1980, remembering the May Day of 1920 'I carried the flag as a twelve-year-old textile worker, just started at the mill: 'Nowadays those who go to work are all ladies and gentlemen, they get everything they ask for.' What has happened to the spirit of

those May Day sermons of confidence in the future, of faith in the march of reason and progress? 'Educate yourselves! Schools and courses, books and newspapers are instruments of liberty! Drink at the fountain of Science and Art: you will then become strong enough to bring about justice. What has happened to the collective dream of building Jerusalem in our green and pleasant land?

And yet, if May Day has become no more than just another holiday, a day - I am quoting a French advertisement - when one need not take a certain tranquillizer, because one does not have to work, it remains a holiday of a special kind. It may no longer be, in the proud phrase,

'a holiday outside all calendars', for in Europe it has entered all calendars. It is, in fact, more universally taken off work than any other days except 25 December and 1 January, having far outdistanced its other religious rivals. But it came from below. It was shaped by anonymous working people themselves who, through it, recognized themselves, across lines of occupation, language, even nationality as a single *class* by deciding, once a year, deliberately not to work: to flout the moral, political and economic compulsion to labour. As Victor Adler put it in 1893: 'This is the sense of the May holiday, of the rest from work, which our adversaries fear. This is what they feel to be revolutionary.

The historian is interested in this centenary for a number of reasons. In one way it is significant because it helps to explain why Marx became so influential in labour movements composed of men and women who had not heard of him before, but recognized his call to become conscious of themselves as a class and to organize as such. In another, it is important, because it demonstrates the historic power of grassroots thought and feeling, and illuminates the way men and women who, as individuals, are inarticulate, powerless and count for nothing can nevertheless leave their mark on history. But above all this is for many of us,

historians or not, a deeply moving centenary, because it represents what the German philosopher Ernst Bloch called (and treated at length in two bulky volumes) *The Principle of Hope*^[i]: *the hope of a better future in a better world. If nobody else remembered it in 1990, it was incumbent on historians to do so.*

[i] Originally published in 1994.